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# Oiling The Corporate Wheels -- Are You An Effective Friendship Broker?



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Leadership Strategy

AN INTERVIEW WITH

## Stefano Tasselli

Stefano Tasselli is an Assistant Professor at the Innovation Management group of the Rotterdam School of Management, Erasmus University.



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DREAMSTIME

All organisations rely on effective team and group work for their success. But teamwork doesn't just happen. Groups of individuals need to be brought together and held together, working in concert for a common aim.

Of course, theories on how to achieve this go in and out of fashion. Once we believed that the approach based on 'command and control', where an authority figure issues orders to designated subordinates, was the best way to explain how organizations function. Now that has been superseded by a more consensual and informal model where leaders consult, encourage and engage with those around them rather than barking out instructions like some ferocious sergeant-major.

However, what is often given insufficient credit is the role of inter-personal relationships and especially actual friendship in explaining work and business success. The potential of these relationships often needs to be harnessed by individuals who can link a network of one-to-one friendships together to make organizations look like 'small worlds' where everybody can reach anybody else. We all know and recognise these people. They are not just present in the workplace. We almost certainly experienced them back in the school playground - those who didn't just stick to their own year group but made friends with kids from other years or even teachers - well before any idea of management theory had ever entered our heads.



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But how do such people fulfil their highly important roles and how to know if we are one ourselves?

The key skill of these organisational catalysts is the ability to build links between sets of groups of friends who would be otherwise unconnected to each other. We are all

aware of such cliquey groups - we're very likely members of at least one – the gang of 'mates' who get on well together because they all share the same circumstances, interests, etc, etc. Well, organizational catalysts connect such 'caves' and make organizations places where it is a bit easier to connect with people who do not belong to our gang.

However, not everybody is supposed to be good in that delicate role. Is it the case that people with specific personalities do better than others while being catalysts across different cliques?

Working with my co-author Martin Kilduff (UCL School of Management), I decided to investigate this by collecting data on over 1000 friendship pairs in two very different environments - the critical care unit of a hospital and a two-year master's program class at a business school for young professionals transitioning in their careers.

What was immediately clear from the research was how important trust was in the fulfilment of this type of role. But what was also clear was that generating this necessary level of trust called for substantially different personalities depending on the network context.

The biggest challenge is perhaps the one that can have most benefit for any organisation – the drawing together and marshalling of as many different 'cliques' of friends as possible. This is the real corporate diplomat in action, creating and maintaining a network that would simply not come into being without them and which would fall apart without their continuing attention, time and input. It's a role we have named 'friendship broker'. And, our research suggests that achieving real success calls for two key skills associated with an individual's 'diplomatic personality style. First, what we call 'low blirtatiousness'. Or to put it more simply, thinking before speaking and choosing words carefully. Second, 'high self-monitoring': being flexible in self-presentation, and thus able to present an acceptable and appropriate self to different kinds of people.

However, if we go back to the managing of inter-personal relationships within the 'gang' context I mentioned earlier, it seems that having a diplomatic personality is not just ineffective, it could even be damaging. Maintaining trust among a single group of tightly-bound colleagues appears to be a much more visceral experience. Close groups seem to look for a much more straightforward style. They want the individuals that

bind them together to be forthright, talkative, and open. In short they want to believe that what they see and what they hear is the real, genuine person, no matter how effectively they work or how talkative they are.

As we so often find there is no 'one size fits all' solution to the management of an organisation's most powerful resource – its people. But knowing what kind of personality better matches important situations in organizational networks could make all the difference in making truly effective team and group work a reality.



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